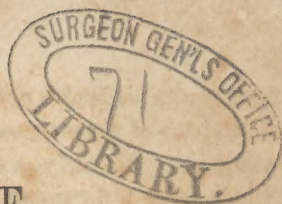


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HYGIENE.

BY ALVAN TALCOTT, M. D., OF GUILFORD.

MR. PRESIDENT, AND FELLOWS OF THIS CONVENTION :

The prevention and the cure of disease, are alike the province of the medical art. Although it is to the cure of diseases that our attention as medical men is, and should be, mainly directed ; yet I crave your indulgence while, on this occasion, I throw out a few remarks upon the prevention of disease, and the preservation of health. And I shall not allude to those great measures of sanitary reform which are gaining the attention of cities and of states, and which are alike the glory and the happiness of the present age ; but I shall confine my remarks to those facts, principles and measures, which we, in our individual capacity, daily contemplate.

As physiologists we believe that the natural condition of the human system is health, and that disease is a condition incidental, and superinduced by some agency that disturbs and deranges the system. Health consists in the integrity of structure and function of all the organs of the system. It is the calm, equable, almost unconscious flow of the stream of life. And this, we may well assume, as the condition of this curious and wonderful machine, when it came from the hands of its Creator, and was pronounced "very good."

We cannot, it is true, give our assent to the doctrine advanced by some ardent minds in our day, that in all cases "it is a sin to be sick;" still we are forced to admit, that a large proportion of the diseases that afflict our species, do originate in the transgression, on our own part, or on that of our progenitors, of some of the great physiological laws of life.

Man is furnished by his Creator with certain powers and faculties, bodily and mental, adapted, in their legitimate exercise,

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to promote his health and his happiness ; and it is the perversion and abuse of these powers and faculties, that bring on disease and pain. Scarcely a day passes in our professional pursuits, which does not present us with cases where disease is the direct and manifest result of the infraction of nature's laws ; and in many other cases where the connection is not so obvious, we may, upon investigation, trace back the chain of causes till we reach a similar origin.

If these views are correct, do they not lay before us a wide field for the exercise of our science and skill, and add new importance to our profession. If that man is accounted a benefactor to his species who makes two blades of grass grow where one grew before, surely must he be so esteemed who can show how to prevent the ruddy glow of health from being supplanted by the sickly paleness of disease, and can forestall the anguish, the misery and the despair, of a hopeless decline.

Our profession and station in life give us influence in this particular, which no other class of men can exercise. The opinions we express, and the example we give, cannot fail to produce a deep and permanent, though perhaps a silent, influence, upon the intelligent portions of society. At least shall we be free from the charge of interested motives, in recommending to the community that course of life which is dictated by a regard to their own best interests.

I believe it is generally admitted that public health is deteriorating. Acute diseases, indeed, are probably less frequent, and certainly less fatal, than formerly. Some, as small pox, are quite disarmed of their terrors, and all are rendered more manageable ; so that at the present day, as compared with former periods, the per centage of deaths has diminished, and the mean duration of human life has vastly increased. But notwithstanding these facts we must still admit that disease is increasing in the community. Few among us, and especially of the female portion of community, enjoy an uninterrupted flow of health. Chronic diseases, of various grades and forms, are rife among us. Scrofula, in its Protean shapes, is fearfully prevalent, and indeed lies at the root of a large portion of the maladies of our day, either hurrying the patient to speedy death in some of its more malignant forms, as Phthisis or Cancer, or, in its milder

shapes, poisoning the fountains of life, and embittering all its enjoyments. How many cases can every physician call to mind, occurring in his experience, of diseases manifesting themselves in the organic nerves, as neuralgia, spinal irritation, and palpitation of the heart; how many, of derangements of the functions of digestion, sanguification, and nutrition; how many, of tubercular formations in the thoracic and abdominal organs; how many, of that indefinable languor and torpor of all the animal and vital functions, which we designate by the comprehensive term, ill-health.

Who can estimate the full import of the term: the days of sadness, and nights of weariness, that measure its duration; the utter prostration of all the energies, mental and physical; the wreck of intellect and fancy, of hope, happiness, and temper, which follow in its train? The most exalted genius is prostrated in the dust, and the highest flights of fancy sink into the imbecility of childhood. He whose capacious mind could grapple with the sublimest truths, and spread them forth with an energy and an eloquence breathing from his lips, and flashing from his eye, that move, captivate and persuade, is now able to rise no higher than the recital of his oft-told infirmities. And in humbler life, she who was the head of the domestic circle, whose smile was reflected by all the happy inmates of her family, and who was the very personification of active benevolence, is touched by the enchanter's wand, in the withering prostration of protracted disease, and the fountains of domestic happiness are dried up, and the light and joyousness which diffused themselves wherever she moved, are changed to sadness and gloom.

Can we, or can we not, do something to alleviate all this mental and physical suffering? In many of the affections of this class, as they occur in our practice, we are constrained to admit the imperfection, if not the inefficiency, of the resources of our art for effecting their removal. Should we not, then, as philosophers, as philanthropists, as true and enlightened physicians, exert all the influence we can command, to arrest the developement of those forms of disease which it sometimes baffles all our skill to cure.

What, then, are some of the agencies efficient in the production of disease, which are more or less subject to our control?

It is universally admitted that some diseases are congenital, or we might say with more correctness, ante-genital. Infants have been born with all the marks of small pox, the disease having been communicated by the mother and run its course before birth. The influence of syphilis, also, in affecting the embryo, and generally destroying its vitality, is too familiar to medical men to need a remark. And in the case of many other diseases popularly termed hereditary, though the child may not inherit from its parents the disease actually developed, still it does inherit certain constitutional traits and tendencies, which may be deemed the germ of disease, to be unfolded in subsequent life. As examples, we may specify mania, epilepsy, palsy, phthisis, scrofula. Every intelligent physician considers a tendency to these diseases to be transmitted from parent to child, and expects to see their developement when age and other circumstances favor. I believe the brain and the lungs are the organs which are most usually the seat of these hereditary tendencies.

But further than all this, I think we are not without evidence that various states and conditions of the parents which do not of themselves constitute disease, exert an important and permanent influence upon the delicate organization of the fœtus. The doctrine sanctioned by remote antiquity, that the maternal imagination and maternal longings are competent to produce in the offspring those external marks call'd *nævi*, we shall most of us reject, though we shall thereby incur the charge of grievous heresy from the venerable matrons who have these matters in their special keeping. Be this as it may, we can show, by evidence that cannot be disputed, that the health and temperament of children, and even the cast of their mental faculties, are greatly influenced by the habits and practices of their parents. It is notorious that the children of parents who abandon themselves to habits of intemperance and sensual excess, are often born with feeble constitutions, puny, pale, emaciated, the living pictures of premature old age, dragging out a few months or years of hopeless suffering, and sinking into a premature grave. And even when life is not destroyed, the delicate organization of the brain is seriously, and often irrecoverably deranged, exhibiting all the grades of enfeebled intellect down to

hopeless idiocy. The children of such parents, when not idiotic, are deficient in bodily and mental energy, they are incapable of self-control, and are predisposed, by their very organization, to have cravings for the same indulgences to which their parents yielded. The same remarks are applicable to all habits in parents, which derange the cerebral functions and depress the vital energies. Excess in eating and in sleep, and habits of indolence and self-indulgence, as well as intemperance and sexual excess, are sure to tell upon the organization of the progeny. All excesses have their penalties, and these penalties are not only inflicted upon the transgressor, but are also "visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation."

As the first means, then, of securing health and soundness of body and mind in their offspring, let parents look well to themselves. As they value a healthy organization, not only in their own persons, but also in their children and their children's children, let them use all suitable means to restore, preserve and invigorate, their own health. Especially let them shun all habits of self-indulgence and all sensual excess, and every thing that lowers the tone of the vital energies, using all their faculties, bodily and mental, as not abusing them.

And let those who contemplate entering upon the interesting and responsible relations of married life, regard as a consideration never to be overlooked in the selection of a partner for life, soundness of constitution and perfection of bodily health. Especially let not those be united in this relation who have the same constitutional taint, since, in such a case, the defect in question will most assuredly appear with four-fold energy in their offspring. Let the principle, established by sound philosophy, be admitted and acted upon, that parents of opposite constitutions, temperaments, and even complexions, who are not too old nor too young, and who are not, however remotely, akin by blood, are those who in the ordinary course of things are most usually blessed with healthy children.

Again, the mismanagement of infancy and childhood is a frequent cause of disease. Infants, when ushered into the world, are considered to have undergone a long fast, and are therefore presumed to be hungry; consequently, pap, and porridge, and similar appliances, are put in busy requisition, and if the child

cries from an overloaded stomach, this is proof positive that he is suffering from hunger, and the process of stuffing is followed up *ad libitum*. If the infant escapes these dangers and reaches the age of three or four months, instead of being confined for its sustenance to that life-giving fountain which a wise Providence has furnished for the nourishment of helpless infancy, he is allowed to partake of all kinds of food which he can be induced to swallow ; food, healthy, it may be, for the adult stomach, but hurtful and even dangerous to the delicate organs of infancy. As years steal on, cakes and condiments, pies and pastry, nuts, fruits, and other crudities, are alternately or in combination brought to bear upon the organs of digestion ; and to crown all, the derangements which these and all other disturbing forces produce, are increased and confirmed by the various drugs and doses for such cases made and provided. The whole catalogue of syrups and balsams, cordials and elixirs, is put in requisition, for the purpose, as one might imagine, of punishing nature for thus resenting the outrages committed upon her laws.

As advancing childhood prompts to active exercise, the girls are, to be sure, allowed to exercise their fingers in running over the threads of embroidery, or the keys of the piano ; but free, unrestrained exercise in the open air is entirely out of the question, for it is not genteel for girls to romp in the street, and besides, the sun and air would spoil their delicate complexions.

Furthermore, the human frame, for its well-being, requires air for respiration. By this agent is the blood, as it returns from its circulation throughout the system, purified of its carbon, and fitted to be sent again on its mission, carrying life, health and nutrition, to all parts of the economy. Of the physiology of respiration, the compositions and decompositions which it accomplishes, its *modus operandi*, and its ultimate results, I need not speak, in presence of the intelligent professional men who hear me. But if I could speak, trumpet-tongued, to the community in which we move, of the lamentable results of the want of an adequate supply of air, I should be doing that community a service. Surely this element is not so difficult of access, or so limited in supply, that one need be put on short allowance. If we will but give the respiratory muscles

full play, they will elevate the ribs and depress the diaphragm, and the vital fluid will rush in. But the bonds of fashion, in the case of one moiety of the community, confine the chest, so as to prevent the expansion of the ribs, and thus diminish, by one half, the quantity of air admitted.

This pressure upon the parietes of the chest, besides its effect in impeding respiration, seriously injures the organs provided to give nourishment to the infant. And the retracted nipple, and the obliterated lactiferous ducts, and the atrophy of the whole gland, which sometimes render the office of giving sustenance to the infant being utterly and forever impossible, with the whole train of inflammation and abscess which are the necessary result, are the sad consequences of transgressing, in this particular, the laws of our being. By pressure we can obliterate arteries and veins, and can cause the absorption of bone itself; and ought we to expect that the delicate structure of the mammary glands will sustain this severe, this unremitting pressure with impunity. It is the present fashion of dress that we condemn, and not the abuse of that fashion; and its injurious results which we have described, though unquestionably aggravated by tight-lacing, are not thereby produced. When it shall become the fashion to remove all the pressure of dress from the female breast, then will nearly all the suffering now incident to lactation, be among the things that were.

But to return from our digression, not only should the system be permitted to exercise the mechanism of breathing free and unrestrained, by giving full play to the respiratory muscles, but the air itself should be pure. All noxious miasms and exhalations from animal and vegetable decompositions should be avoided, and perfect cleanliness in and around our dwellings scrupulously maintained. Our apartments, and especially our sleeping apartments, should be clean, dry, and sufficiently spacious. By these means will the air be pure, but in order to preserve its purity, it must be often changed. The respiration of the same air cannot be repeated more than three times without immediate danger to life, and not at all, without injury to the system. The free ventilation of our apartments then, is absolutely essential to the purity of the vital element; and we regret that the fashions of the day are so much at variance

with this salutary practice. The old-fashioned fire-places of our ancestors, well filled with blazing wood, surmounted by the massive stone chimney, whose dimensions will allow the children, from their favorite position in the chimney corner, to prosecute the study of practical astronomy, have all passed away, and the age of anthracite and of air-tight stoves has come in their stead. Every fire-place must be hermetically closed, every door listed, and every window wedged; and if people can so manage that no cold can get in, and no heat can get out, they consider that they shall have accomplished — a great saving of fuel. Meanwhile the air is rendered unhealthy by being raised to too high a temperature, and corrupted by repeated respiration without the possibility of its renewal; while minute particles of dust, which an open chimney would carry away, float in countless myriads in the atmosphere, irritating the lungs, as well as obstructing the pores of the skin, and interfering with the mutual reactions of the air and the blood in the minute ramifications of the lungs. I have been in school rooms where the lungs almost refuse to admit the oppressive, corrupted air, and where the very walls became so contaminated, that a ventilation for hours could alone remove the sensation of closeness and impurity.

Again, scarcely inferior in importance to the functions of the lungs, are the functions of the skin. A vast amount of matter, constituting the waste of the system, is thrown off by insensible perspiration. An animal coated over with varnish, will speedily die. And if the pores of the skin become obstructed through want of cleanliness, disease must necessarily ensue. Let free and frequent ablutions with water be resorted to in infancy and childhood, and continued through life. This practice when rendered habitual, becomes grateful to the feelings, and thus effectually removes that disease under which so many in our day labor—a moral hydrophobia. Let the inner garments at all seasons be of cotton, and be often changed; and let under-garments of silk and flannel be relinquished to the exclusive enjoyment of the phthisical and the rheumatic. Let vigorous exercise and brisk friction keep up the action of the cutaneous nerves and blood vessels, and let at least one half of the attention and care be bestowed upon the surface of the

human system, which the good farmer is wont to bestow upon his horses and his cattle.

The importance of exercising due discretion in the articles of food and drink, is too obvious to require much comment. Let the food be simple and plain, abundant but not excessive in quantity, with a suitable mixture of animal and vegetable food. As drinks, let all alcoholic and vinous liquors be totally discarded, as pernicious in their tendency and dangerous in their use. They may in some cases of disease be employed as medicines, but with extreme caution. Tea and coffee can be used by some without much injury, but persons of nervous and irritable temperament should abstain entirely from both. For all, the best and most healthy drink is pure cold water, and it becomes also by use the most grateful and agreeable. Tobacco in all its forms deranges the tone of the stomach, impairs nervous energy, and acts as a drain on the system; and the habitual use of the article admits of no apology or excuse.

I should fail to do justice to my subject were I to neglect to call your attention to a point which has no unimportant bearing upon public health. I allude to the indiscriminate drugging and medication so fashionable at the present day. We have read of the golden age, the silver age, the iron age, it is reserved to us to live in the dosing age. Multitudes of nostrums, each warranted to "cure all the ills that flesh is heir to," are daily spread before us by the public press, and gulped down into the public stomach. A decoction of any root or plant, from Yellow-dock upward, sweetened with New Orleans molasses, and flavored with essence of wintergreen, will sell readily at a dollar a bottle, and will call forth an array of the great names of the land in praise of its sovereign virtues. Such a preparation may have the negative merit of not doing much harm, unless it be to the pocket. But when we see preparations of Arsenic, advertised, and sold, and used, as popular remedies, by those who are utterly ignorant as to what article they are tampering with; when we find various irritating drugs put forth in the shape of pills, and recommended to the use of the sick and the well of all ages from tender infancy upwards, as "good at all times, dose 2 to 20," we are constrained to believe that the community may sustain injury.

For ourselves, we cannot be induced to believe that human nature is essentially nothing but a tissue of disease, or that all the health of which mankind are capable is bottled up in certain mystic bottles, with the maker's name blown in the glass; and that just in proportion to the quantity swallowed will be the *quantum* of health which the system will contain.

The human system is a curious and wonderful machine, delicate in its parts, intricate in its arrangements; and to understand the structure, action, relations, and sympathies, of all its organs and tissues, may well be the labor of a life. Especially will it task the most vigorous intellect, to discover the seat, causes, and tendencies of diseased action, and the adaptation of the various remedies to the ever-varying phases of disease.

It is far better to obviate causes of disease than to remedy the results, to prevent the action of disturbing forces than to correct those disturbances when produced. And when the germs of disease display themselves, to be able to do the right thing at the right time, and neither too little nor too much,—so to select and apply the remedies, as to remove disease *cito, tuto, jucunde*, speedily, safely, and with no untoward results, requires far-reaching forethought, knowledge, and skill.

Such is ever the aim of the true physician. He knows of no universal panacea, no stereotype mode of practice applicable to all diseases from Apoplexy to Zona, and adequate, by some indefinable magical process, to uproot them all. The veritable *Elixir vitæ*, which in spite of man's follies, his excesses, and his vices, is to render him immortal upon earth, he has not yet discovered. He is content to be the assistant and guide of nature, to meet her in her wanderings from the paths of virtue and truth, and urge her to retrace her devious steps, and to fix her eye with a firmer stedfastness of purpose upon the enduring landmarks of moderation and virtue.

An important point which must not be overlooked in this connection, is the due control of the passions and mental affections. Man is a complex being composed of mind and matter, and these component parts mutually act and react upon each other. A violent fit of anger, or any other intense mental emotion, may derange, even fatally, the functions of the stomach, the heart, or the brain. But it is the depressing passions,

anxiety, grief, and disappointment, that are especially to be noticed as the causes of complicated and protracted disease. The weight of domestic cares, the ordering and management of household affairs, has broken down the health of many an excellent wife and mother, and doomed her to drag out a miserable existence, a constant victim to that most annoying of all evils, ill-health.

The youthful portion of community, at a period of their lives at once the most interesting and the most critical, are exposed to a danger of which few except medical men can realize the magnitude or the extent. The premature and unnatural indulgence of those passions and propensities which rise into existence at this period, saps the foundation of the constitution, and sows the seeds of infirmities and diseases which cease not to produce their melancholy fruit while life endures. The blighting of the bud of promise all can witness; the secret worm at the root, it may require a practiced eye to detect. How many of the cases of chronic disease of the heart, the lungs, and the digestive organs; of chorea, epilepsy, hysteria, and the long list of nervous affections; of the loss of memory and the weakening of the intellect, down to complete and hopeless idiocy, owe their secret but real origin to this prolific cause. Unnatural indulgences of the kind we are contemplating meet with their just and inevitable punishment in this life, in the derangement of structure or annihilation of function in the organs abused, or in the more lamentable result of transmitting to posterity, from generation to generation, enfeebled minds and decrepit bodies, until the very race and name of the transgressor is rooted out of existence.

Nor are unnatural or illicit indulgences the only forms of abuse that should meet our censure. Some of the diseases to which persons in married life are subject, owe their origin to excesses of a kindred nature. Whence arise those numerous cases of uterine disease, of so called spinal irritation, and the various nervous affections, which task our time and skill as physicians, and from some forms of which a large proportion of females in married life are the constant or occasional sufferers? Do they not arise, to a greater extent than is generally suspected, from a real, though perhaps unconscious infraction of na-

ture's laws? Would not the prevalence of enlightened views with respect to these and all the laws of our being prevent a vast amount of suffering? And may we not expect that a light heart and a cheerful temper, with a rigid and hearty adherence to the rules of virtue, sobriety, and moderation, will in the ordinary course of things be attended with health?

As an efficient means of counteracting the vicious tendencies of the age, we would urge increased attention to the cultivation of the intellectual powers. Let our youth be taught to reason, to think, to compare, to judge, as of more consequence than the display of all the genteel accomplishments and fashionable frivolities of the day. Give their minds at all times something to do. The most effectual method of preventing the growth of the weeds of vice, is to pre-occupy the ground with the plants of virtue. True, the mental powers should not be overtaken. Intense and protracted mental application is liable to produce disease, and hard students often become dyspeptics. The mind requires relaxation. The bow that is never unbent loses its elasticity. Mental application should be alternated with bodily exercise, and bodily exercise with mental application. All the powers and faculties should be cultivated in harmonious concert, giving to each its due developement, so as to constitute THE PERFECT MAN, with vigorous body and well disciplined mind, with intelligence to see the beauty, order, and harmony, of the Creator's works, and with powers and energies sufficient to perform the duties, sustain the trials, and encounter the dangers, incident to humanity. Let us then, if the views which I have advanced are correct, use our influence to usher in the dawn of a brighter day. Let us impress it upon the circle in which we move, by precept and by example, that it is only by acting in harmony with the laws of our being, only in subjecting the material to the spiritual, the animal to the intellectual, and all to the control and guidance of enlightened wisdom, that we can hope to acquire and maintain that greatest of all earthly blessings, *mens sana in corpore sano*.

